

## Chapter 1 Introduction



The dry lightning storm that blasted across the Bitterroot the night of July 31 ignited 78 new fires. (National Interagency Fire Center photo)

No one who lived in the Bitterroot Valley through the summer of 2000 was untouched by the fires. These fires eventually consumed more than 356,000 acres of public and private land.

## Introduction

During the summer of 2000, people of the Bitterroot Valley saw miles of mountains ablaze, air black with smoke, and homes and possessions consumed in historic wildfires that burned 356,000 acres of public and private land (Figure 1).

The purpose of this special report is to provide a perspective of what happened, why it happened, where it happened, and what will happen next in the Bitterroot Valley and surrounding landscapes. It is presented to share knowledge regarding the impacts to natural resources, and document impacts to people, and their reactions during the fires and in the aftermath.

The impact of the fires was life-changing for many. Few can recall experiencing such an event. One objective of this report is to document for posterity the historic Bitterroot fires of 2000.

During the summer of 2000, nearly 20 percent of the Bitterroot National Forest was visited by fire. The fires blackened the western skies above the town of Hamilton, burned deep into the back country above West Fork's Painted Rocks Lake, and stretched from the height of Lost Trail Pass down the Sapphire ridges, past Darby to four miles east of Hamilton.

The stories of the fires are as long as the stretch of firelines that attempted to stop the flames.

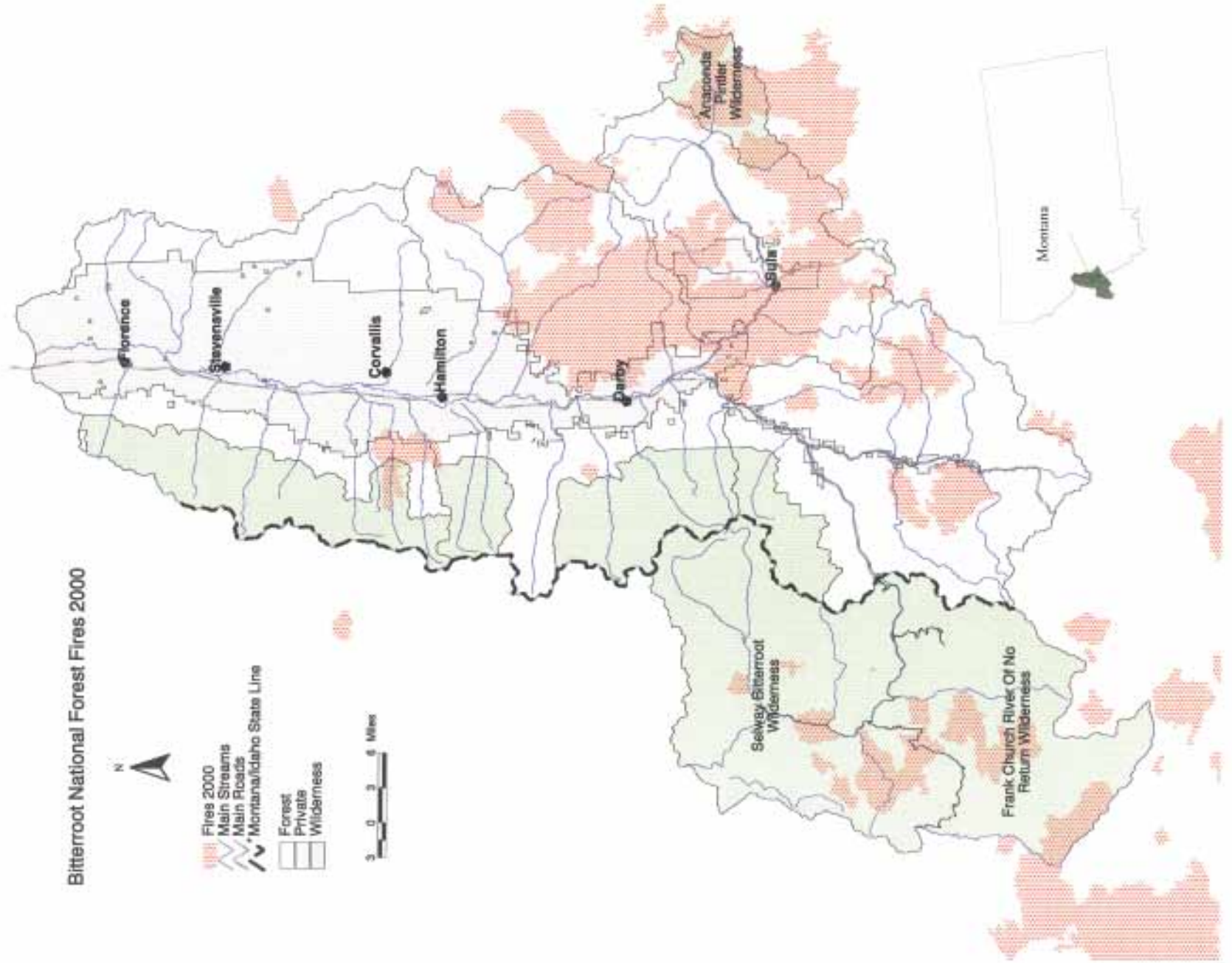
They are as numerous as the people who lived through the fire and smoke filled days of August and early September.

The summer fire season began in June with a lightning strike in the Fish Lake area, high in the Upper East Fork, that grew to five acres before being declared out on June 9. On July 15, the Little Blue Fire burned more than 5,800 acres and forced the season's first evacuation of 25 homes near Painted Rocks Lake.



Helicopter on Little Blue Fire. (photo by Larry Russell)

Figure 1: Bitterroot National Forest 2000 Fires.



‘Last night, we issued a disaster declaration for Montana. There is a lot to be done out there. Those people are working hard.’

President Clinton  
*Missoulian* 9/1/00



The summer fire season began in June with a lightning strike in the Fish Lake area. (National Interagency Fire Center photo)

Little Blue, the Cougar Fire nearby on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, the 110-acre Saloon Fire near Lost Horse Creek, the Twin Fire on the Salmon-Bitterroot Forest boundary, and the Gird 2 Fire in the Sapphires were all blazing and staffed by firefighters by the end of July. Fires across the western United States were stretching firefighting resources thin. Even with the Bitterroot Valley surrounded by that initial ring of fires, no one could have envisioned what the next few weeks would bring.

The dry lightning storm that blasted across the Bitterroot the night of July 31 ignited 78 new fires. Some of those fires grew together into giant complexes and changed the local ecosystem more significantly than any other event in the past 100 years. It brought the nation's media to the Valley, and people grew accustomed to satellite trucks and nationally known newscasters telling the rest

of the world about the fires, the Valley's residents, and forests.

Sunday August 6, was a day that Bitterrooters will remember. On that day smaller fires rapidly grew together creating larger fires. In the wake, many homes and other buildings were reduced to ashes and vast forested slopes left with standing burned trees.



Spot fire on Little Blue. (photo by Larry Russell)





The local volunteer fire and sheriff's departments played a vital role in structure protection and ensuring the safety of residents. (photo by Karen Wattenmaker)

The Bitterroot National Forest was closed to public use, and soon after, recreation on all public lands in the Valley was banned until fire danger subsided.

More than 1,500 people in Ravalli County were eventually evacuated from homes. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, Bitter Root Humane



Crew transport on Valley Complex fires. (photo by Karen Wattenmaker)

Association, and local churches and service organizations joined hundreds of volunteers from all walks of life to make life more bearable for the displaced refugees—some who would have homes to return to and some who would not. Seventy homes, 170 other structures and 94 vehicles were eventually lost in the fires; however, over 1,700 threatened residences were successfully protected—a testament to the dedication of the firefighters.

Thousands of firefighters from across the nation and other countries came to the Bitterroot Valley.

The local volunteer fire and sheriff's departments played a vital role in structure protection and ensuring the safety of residents. And when the rains finally came and the fires subsided, an even larger army of rehabilitation workers—once more assisted by willing, eager volunteers from the communities—went to work breaking up the firelines, reseeded the burned hillsides, replacing culverts, cleaning up the burned home sites, and stabilizing drainages.

Fire changes the environment, and the burns of 2000, despite our best stabilization efforts, could lead to the floods and mudslides of 2001. Landscape altering events began last summer; the Bitterroot National Forest now faces a large program of fire recovery work that will be a challenge for years to come.

**'There really is no way we can ever thank you [firefighters] enough. We are very, very grateful. We are absolutely bowled over by your willingness and commitment to stand shoulder to shoulder with us.'**

Governor Mark Racicot  
*Missoulian* 8/31/00

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